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# Those Rambler Fuel Economy Runs

By Patrick Foster

In the twenty-year life span of the modern Rambler automobile (1950–1969), Rambler won a little bit of fame on the racetrack. It is also remembered as the car that broke all existing sales records for independent automakers. Rambler was even named Motor Trend Car of the Year in 1963. However, in all likelihood, the three things people remember most about Rambler cars are:

- 1) The reclining seats that turned into a bed
- 2) Rambler's famous gas mileage

- 3) The reclining seats that turned into a bed.

We won't touch numbers one and three with a ten-foot pole, but there is a lot of history we can relate regarding Rambler's splendid reputation for fuel economy. A surprising amount of effort went into establishing Rambler as America's benchmark for fuel economy, and the level of sophisticated testing that went into it is amazing.

When the Rambler was introduced in March 1950, it was intended to be a smaller, more compact family car, one whose light weight and trim size would enable better maneuverability in city

driving and outstanding gas mileage. George Romney, then a Nash vice president, explained to reporters that Rambler could get "...around 30 miles per gallon...at average road speeds." That was really excellent in those days because the other automobile companies were not paying much attention to fuel economy, to the point where a six-cylinder Chevy or Ford was good for perhaps only 15–20 miles per gallon. Journalist Ted Koopman test-drove a Rambler two-door hardtop in 1952 and was amazed by its road-holding ability, smooth ride and great acceleration. "And best of all," he noted, "the Rambler does all this and



averages well up to 30 mpg, while its heavier competitor will be lucky to average 12." So Rambler's gas mileage story was seen as a distinct competitive advantage.

A Rambler convertible with overdrive was entered in the 1951 Mobilgas Economy Run, and established a new record at 31.05 miles per gallon. On the 840-mile course, the little Rambler traveled at an average speed of just over 40 miles per hour. Then, in the 1955 Mobilgas Economy Run, Rambler stunned the competition again when a Rambler, equipped this time with automatic transmission, delivered 27.47 mpg, easily beating the 22.8 mpg delivered by a Ford Fairlane Six and 21.56 wrung out of a Chevy Bel Air Six. It was not a case of comparing apples to oranges, either. The Rambler used in the test was a four-door sedan on a 108-inch wheelbase,

eight inches longer than the two-door, and its interior room was comparable to the Ford and Chevy offerings.

Jealousy abounds in the car business, so it is easy to figure out what happened next. When the 1956 Mobilgas Economy Run from Los Angeles to Colorado Springs took place during March 19–22 that year, Rambler found itself shunted off to a "Special Limited Displacement" class. Rambler was exiled there despite the fact that its six-cylinder engine was only 27 cubic inches less than Ford's and about 40 cubes smaller than Chevy's. Now, since Economy Run winners were measured in ton-miles (mileage performance in relation to the weight of the car), cubic inches were not supposed to matter. In fact, that's how an Oldsmobile 88 getting 19.7 mpg was rated higher than a Nash Ambassador that achieved 20.7 mpg—the Olds scored better in ton-



**Left:** At the finish line of the 1956 Mobilgas Economy Run, in which Rambler was rated highest in miles per gallon. **Above:** Big Rambler wagon with overdrive managed to deliver a surprising 32.09 miles per gallon in factory-sponsored "Cross Country Economy Run." **Below:** The Mobilgas Economy Run route ran from Los Angeles to Colorado Springs.





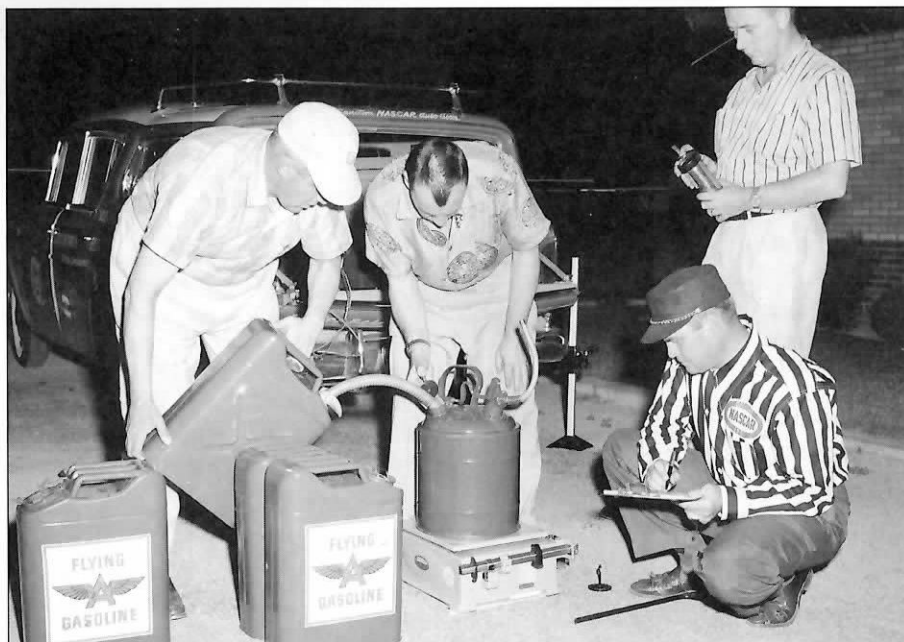
NASCAR officials even sealed the hood of the Rambler Cross Country Economy car.



Les Viland checks the level at the door sill during a fuel stop.

miles! But Rambler would have led its competitors in ton miles as well as raw miles per gallon—hence it got sent to “special class.” The Rambler ended up first in class with 24.35 miles per gallon. The only other car in its class, a Studebaker Champion, got only 20.04 mpg despite having a smaller engine than Rambler’s. Rambler ranked first among all entries in actual miles per gallon, though that fact was downplayed in the Economy Run’s official press releases.

Unwilling to settle for that, two Amer-



Fuel is weighed and measured as a NASCAR official looks on.

ican Motors employees figured they would run their own test. Les Viland and Carl Chakmakian, employees in AMC’s Engineering department, decided to take a new Rambler on a transcontinental economy run to demonstrate in a dramatic manner exactly what it could do. Picking a new Rambler off the assembly line (they chose a Cross Country station wagon, naturally), they tuned and prepped it to factory specs—though rather carefully, we imagine. Tires were pumped to 28psi, 4psi higher than the recommended 24psi. Then, with a NASCAR observer on board, the two men set off on a landmark 2,961-mile ride from Los Angeles, California, to New York City.

Over the next six and a half days, they drove at legal speeds, across mountains and deserts, through rain, heat and ex-

tremes of temperature, on the highway and in dozens of small towns and cities. Their total elapsed driving time for the run was 73.39 hours.

The results they achieved astonished the nation! In that age of “gas-guzzling dinosaurs,” the Rambler station wagon managed a phenomenal 32.09 miles per gallon, crossing the entire country—nearly 3,000 miles—with only five stops for gas! What made this more amazing was that it was achieved not by a little puddle jumper but by a four-door, six-passenger family station wagon. NASCAR certified the run. Their observer went along on every leg of the trip, even sealing the gas tank after each refueling.

AMC’s engineers had not pulled a fast one—they had simply driven very carefully, utilizing every gas mileage technique they knew. That meant no jackrabbit starts, no “pedal to the metal” acceleration. They got up to high gear as quickly as they could and ran in overdrive as much as possible. Using a cruising speed between 45 and 60 mph during the run, the Rambler’s overall speed averaged 40 miles per hour—not fast but certainly not unreasonably slow in those pre-superhighway days. Gas mileage results were fairly consistent too, with the lowest daily run yielding 30.97 mpg, while the best mpg was 34.17 mpg during the LA to Tucson leg. Today’s drivers can only smile wistfully at the expense recorded: During the entire trip, Viland and Chakmakian used 92.27 gallons of gas, for a total cost of \$26.17—less than a penny a mile!

## THE WORK BEHIND THE NUMBERS

To dispel any claims of inaccuracy or hanky-panky during the fuel economy tests, AMC took certain steps to guarantee that the fuel economy numbers were truthful and precise. Of course, the Mobilgas and Pure Oil tests were conducted under the supervision of those sponsoring companies and were run under their rules. But for the independent tests that American Motors did, there were even stricter rules. And to ensure complete honesty, the company asked NASCAR to certify the factory-sponsored runs.

Drivers were required to keep logbooks, some of which we consulted in writing this article. In them were recorded the starting and stopping times, time of each refueling, plus

days miles and total elapsed driving time. Every time the car was fueled up, it was done under the observation of a NASCAR inspector, who then sealed the fuel tank cap until the next refueling. The hood was likewise sealed and could only be opened in the presence of NASCAR personnel.

Special steps were taken at each refueling. During the 1956 Rambler Cross Country economy run, the drivers even leveled the car each time it was refueled, using jacks to raise and level the car. Side to side and front to back measurements were made to make sure all sides of the car were at equal height. NASCAR observers, who rode along every step of the way, kept a sharp watch at each stop.





After refueling is completed, a NASCAR official seals the gas tank.

The resulting publicity did wonders for Rambler's reputation. After noting the surprising amount of publicity the stunt had generated, AMC decided to try some more test runs. The next big event was called the Turnpike Test Run, and the route chosen was from Chicago to New York. Chakmakian and Viland were tapped again to do the driving.

This time two Ramblers were utilized because the test was also meant to illustrate the difference between turnpike driving and driving on conventional roads. One car would travel the Northern Indiana Toll Road and connecting turnpikes in Ohio, Pennsylvania and New Jersey, while the other car would travel the old Routes 30 and 22. The run was co-sponsored by the Indiana Toll Road Commission and American Motors. The cars chosen were new 1957 Cross Country station wagons equipped with six-cylinder engine, manual transmission and overdrive—a drive train combination that was very popular among Rambler buyers.

There were some interesting differences in the outcomes. The Turnpike car made the 1,668-mile round trip in 30 hours, 15 minutes compared to 40 hours and 49 minutes for the other car. More surprising—the faster car also achieved the highest gas mileage! The Turnpike Rambler recorded 30.14 mpg at an average speed of 55 mph, versus 29.62 mpg at an average speed of 40.49 mph set by the other Rambler.

In May 1957, the AMC duo struck again, this time with a well-publicized "Border to Border" fuel economy test.

Driving from Winnipeg, Canada, to Monterey, Mexico, in a stock Rambler Custom four-door sedan, the two men were able to achieve 33.93 mpg, in spite of difficulties that included bad weather, flooded roads and a need to maintain a higher cruising speed to make up for time lost to weather-related delays.

The Rambler Six was not permitted to run in 1957 and 1958 Mobilgas Economy Runs, but Rambler returned for 1959, and a Rambler American with automatic transmission was declared best in the compact class and best in overall miles



Rambler was leveled prior to each refueling.



To compare differences in roads, one of the Ramblers was driven on the turnpike, while the other used conventional roads.



Arriving in New York, Chakmakian and Viland were photographed on Broadway.



Viland and Chakmakian switched to a Rambler four-door sedan for the Border to Border Economy Run of 1957.



Days after departing Canada, Chakmakian and Viland cross over into Mexico during the Border to Border Economy Run. During the trip, they averaged 33.93 mpg.



1959 Rambler Coast to Coast Economy Run. One Rambler was equipped with automatic transmission and achieved 32.7 mpg, while the other, with overdrive, got an incredible 36.88 mpg.



Rambler American recorded fuel economy of 28.35 mpg during the 1960 Mobilgas Economy Run, with Les Viland at the wheel.

per gallon, at 25.29 mpg. Chakmakian and Viland followed that up with another coast-to-coast test using two stock 1959 Rambler Six four-door sedans. The one equipped with an automatic transmission got 32.7 mpg, while the other with overdrive posted an almost unbelievable 36.88 mpg! This was the highest fuel economy ever recorded by an American car in a sanctioned run.

American Motors was gaining huge amounts of publicity from the events, and rapidly building a reputation for good gas mileage, so the test runs continued into the 1960s. For 1960, a Rambler American took the Class A win at 28.35 mpg, while in the 1961 Pure Oil Economy Trials, an American got 26.8 mpg.

When the Rambler American got a powerful new 128hp, 199-cu.in. six as standard equipment for 1966, people wondered how it might affect Rambler's economy standing. However, in that year's Pure Oil Performance Trials, Rambler not only turned in "first in class" acceleration in the 25-70-mph test, it also delivered 24.5 mpg!

Eventually the Rambler fuel economy story became less newsworthy—since people already knew Rambler got the best gas mileage, the latest victories no longer surprised them. In addition, the public was becoming fascinated with performance automobiles again. Pony cars were all the rage, and gas mileage wasn't nearly as important as it had once been. Like all things, the Rambler fuel economy stunts eventually faded away.

